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Summary record of the 10th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 16 October 2006, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Achary (Nepal)
later: Mr. Andersson (Vice-Chairman) (Sweden)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

Election of a Vice-Chairman

1. **The Chairman** said that, as Mr. Djacta (Algeria) was unable to complete his term as Vice-Chairman, Mr. Djeffal (Algeria) had been nominated by the African Group to replace him.
2. *Mr. Djeffal (Algeria) was elected Vice-Chairman by acclamation.*

Agenda item 34: Questions relating to information (A/61/21, A/61/21/Add.1 and A/61/216)

3. **The Chairman** drew attention to the report of the Committee on Information (A/61/21 and Add.1).
4. **Mr. Tharoor** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information), introducing the report of the Secretary-General (A/61/216), said that while support for the United Nations had significantly faltered in some areas, the vast majority of people sought a United Nations that was stronger. Countries which once felt insulated from danger realized that security depended on cooperative, international efforts, and that the role of the United Nations was still valid. The aim of reform was to close the gap between what the people wanted from the United Nations and what the Organization was capable of delivering. One of the challenges in the reform process was in the area of public information.
5. One of the first steps towards reform had been for the Department of Public Information (DPI) to clearly define its mission to communicate the activities and concerns of the Organization for the greatest public impact. Guided by four objectives for greater effectiveness through targeted delivery, the enhanced use of information and communication technologies, the expansion of its grass-roots support base through partnerships with civil society and assessing activities through the annual programme impact review (APIR), DPI had introduced a new operating model and organizational structure. The strategic approach was to set priorities in relation to the overall substantive purposes of the United Nations in order to do what was most pressing, achievable and measurable. Three sets of collaborators supported DPI headquarters staff in gaining maximum media exposure, including United Nations information centres and services, the

United Nations Communications Group (UNCG) and a network of over 1,500 civil society organizations.

6. The new operating model ensured greater internal coordination and a new client consultation process. Secretariat departments and United Nations system organizations were clients and DPI was the service provider. Clients generated the raw material of public information and worked with DPI to identify key messages. DPI recast the material for target audiences and promoted it globally. That approach enabled DPI to tailor its products and services to the needs of the Organization. Client consultations had also given greater visibility to United Nations priority issues.
7. DPI had also introduced the rapid media response mechanism to respond clearly and effectively for a proper understanding of the United Nations in view of external events that could impact quickly on the image of the Organization. The mechanism included regular briefing guidance on priority issues for officials who spoke to the media, a coordinating mechanism for the placement of op-ed articles and daily meetings with the Office of the Secretary-General.
8. In an effort to ensure that the United Nations system spoke with one voice on issues of common interest, UNCG had been formed as a communications platform. The entire United Nations system was now within UNCG; the latter had been so successful at the global level that local UNCGs were created in 2005. Now most countries with a United Nations information centre (UNIC) had a local UNCG. To enhance working together, UNifeed was launched in 2005 as an inter-agency satellite news service offering field video six days a week to a network of over 560 broadcasters. UNifeed covered the work of the entire United Nations system and its cost was nominal compared to the outreach achieved.
9. The role of field offices was being re-evaluated. UNICs in major media hubs had been given a greater regional coordination role, and the entire network of UNICs had been connected to iSeek. UNICs had also been integrated into the Strategic Communications (StratCom) system, an internal Internet communications network which provided information on DPI's priorities and an interactive forum for UNICs to brainstorm and share best practices. All UNICs could also now integrate their activities into the communications efforts of their local United Nations system partners.

10. New information and communication technologies had been key to DPI's drive for improved productivity. In particular, the Internet had emerged as a central element. The level of resources allocated to the development of the United Nations website had gradually increased over the years. Allowing the public to access the Official Documents System (ODS) had resulted in an exponential increase in the number of documents available to Internet users in all official languages, and in a much more multilingual United Nations website. Website usage had almost doubled since 2002. Converting news-related products and service to database-driven applications had yielded results, including increased productivity. Technology had allowed other departments to update their web pages using DPI news feeds. The database-driven e-mail news service had over 44,000 subscribers and had received high marks from its users in a recent survey. The Internet had also contributed to radio and video operations improvements. Webcasting had increased greatly since 1998 and had been extended to Geneva and conferences away from Headquarters. Many radio broadcasters received UN Radio programmes via the Internet and DPI would soon distribute broadcast-quality video and high resolution photos on the Internet.

11. Technology had also helped to expand outreach to civil society. Annual observances of World Environment Day, the International Day of Peace and Human Rights Day included multimedia dialogue and interaction through video links at a number of locations. Partnerships with civil society organizations allowed for the electronic submission of briefings papers by experts and webcasts of briefings for important outreach and information programmes such as the "Holocaust and the United Nations" and "Rwanda, genocide and the UN". DPI was proud of its relationships with non-governmental organizations and academic institutions in Africa. The Academic Initiative Section had been created to strengthen DPI links to academia and its *UN Chronicle* boasted 46,000 visits per month. DPI had also sought new and innovative ways to partner with the private sector and connect with new audiences, such as teaming up with MTV to promote public awareness in non-traditional viewing platforms.

12. Radical changes had been introduced in DPI's library services. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library and Knowledge Sharing Centre (DHLink) was

spearheading an effort to help United Nations libraries develop networks of knowledge-sharing communities. The entire focus of library work was now oriented towards making connections for its users. DHLink had also spearheaded the redesign of the United Nations intranet (iSeek) and had expanded its outreach activities, in particular by reinforcing its support and training for depository libraries.

13. Finally, a new evaluation tool had been introduced and integrated into all aspects of the Department's work. The "annual programme impact review" (APIR) set clearly measurable indicators of achievement for the Department's major activities, allowing managers to determine the effectiveness of their activities. When surveys had shown that "World Chronicle", one of the Department's two major television programmes, had a very small audience, DPI had halted production of the programme. Other surveys had confirmed that DPI met the needs of its audiences the vast majority of the time and that there had been a truly astonishing growth in global access to United Nations public information products and services.

14. Expanded use of new communications technologies had allowed DPI to reinforce its culture of self-evaluation. Web- and video-tracking software was being used to monitor usage of material and regular person-to-person contact was employed to gauge user satisfaction with radio and video programmes.

15. Finally, he said that while many major objectives had been achieved, reform was a process not an event. The reform process of the past five years had laid down the foundation for success.

16. **The Chairman** said that the Committee would now hold an interactive dialogue on the agenda item and then proceed to the general debate. He invited members to put questions to the Under-Secretary-General.

17. **Mr. Ali** (Sudan) said that further clarification was needed on paragraph 14 of the report regarding plans for a United Nations peacekeeping mission in Darfur. His Government was not aware of any such mission to Darfur and had made its position clear on that subject.

18. **Ms. Yan Jiarong** (China) said that the work of DPI had made a significant contribution to strengthening the capacities of the United Nations. In relation to paragraph 6 of the report, further information should be provided on the number of

articles and interviews that had been published in 2006. In addition, it would be useful to know how DPI had approached newspapers to publish those articles. Given the problems that had arisen in connection with the cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad, it would be interesting to learn about the DPI programme of work to promote dialogue between different religions and cultures.

19. **Ms. Zakharova** (Russian Federation), noting that DPI had made significant progress, requested further clarification should be provided on the future direction of its programme of work.

20. **Mr. Suárez Salvia** (Argentina), noting that many delegations shared a passion for promoting multilingualism in the work of the United Nations, asked whether DPI had any plans to promote multilingualism. The responsibility for doing so should be shared by all United Nations bodies and by all member States.

21. **Mr. Tharoor** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information), replying to the representative of the Sudan, said that the Security Council had authorized a peacekeeping mission to Darfur, subject to the approval of the Government of Sudan. Since public information was an essential component of mission planning, DPI had made initial plans for a possible future mission to Darfur. However, those plans had been drafted to ensure that DPI was prepared in the event that the Government of Sudan gave its permission for such a mission.

22. Regarding the question put by the representative of China, he said that, in 2006, four op-ed articles by the Secretary-General had been published by approximately 40 newspapers in 20 to 30 countries. An average of one or two op-ed articles had been published by senior officials and had received a similar level of coverage. DPI maintained a list of contacts that were approached when an article was ready for dissemination and it tried to give preference to those newspapers that were in a position to publish the same article in different languages. In connection with the cartoons that had depicted the prophet Muhammad, DPI had tried to focus on the broader context of promoting a dialogue among civilizations by means of seminars and op-ed articles. The Educational Outreach Section in the DPI Outreach Division had organized a series of seminars entitled "Unlearning Intolerance"

that were aimed at bringing people of different cultures together.

23. With regard to the question put by the representative of the Russian Federation, he said that the main objectives and road map of DPI had been presented in the report and a Strategic Framework for 2008-2009 had been reviewed by the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC).

24. Finally, while agreeing with the representative of Argentina on the importance of multilingualism, he said that it was the responsibility of the substantive departments to ensure that their material was translated into the official languages for use in reports, public information broadcasts and websites.

25. **Mr. Najafi** (Islamic Republic of Iran), noting that the Journalists' Fellowship Programme had accepted 360 journalists since 1981, which amounted to 12 to 15 journalists per year, asked whether it would be possible to increase that number and to take more journalists from the developing countries.

26. **Mr. Tharoor** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information) replied that while it would be useful to increase the number of journalists admitted to the programme, doing so would require increased funding and that required a decision by the General Assembly. The number of journalists admitted to that programme had, in fact, decreased in recent years because the costs of training each journalist had increased whereas funding levels had not.

27. **The Chairman** thanked the Under-Secretary-General and said that the Committee would now proceed to the general debate on the item.

28. **Mr. Gidor** (Israel) expressed satisfaction with the Department's professional standards and vocational commitment. DPI had to convince an increasingly cynical public of the sincerity of the efforts of the United Nations as it struggled to be heard alongside competing narratives.

29. Noting that the role of the United Nations in the Middle East had been more pivotal than ever before during the past year, he said Israel was an ideal location for dissemination of the vision of the United Nations. He therefore invited DPI to open an Information Centre in Israel.

30. He commended DPI and Under-Secretary-General Tharoor for their efforts to promote Holocaust remembrance around the world, adding that he had been touched by the creative ways in which General Assembly resolution 60/7 was being implemented. Promoting awareness of the Holocaust was designed to promote global understanding and mutual tolerance.

31. Israel was disappointed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the only conflict that still had a special information programme and, moreover, one which — by the very definition of its mandate — conveyed a one-sided picture. That seemed rather wasteful, at a time when there were no funds to tell other, more globally relevant stories.

32. Israel was made up of immigrants from more than 160 nations and had been grappling for years with many of the issues raised in the Committee. It would like to share some of its experiences, particularly with regard to the issue of bridging the technological and digital divide. After citing various statistics that attested to its credentials on the subject, he said that his country was eager to share that experience with other nations in the region in order to further the common good.

33. Mr. Alzaabi (United Arab Emirates) said the world had become increasingly aware of the importance of digital technology as a means of disseminating information and in bringing people together. While such technology had had positive effects, it had also created new problems, most notably by widening the economic and social gap between North and South. Accordingly, the international community should agree on a new, more just international system for information that would regulate and develop existing media and digital communications technologies in order to ensure a freer, wider and more balanced flow of information.

34. His country was fully convinced that achievement of the Millennium Development Goals would require providing financial, educational and technical resources to developing countries so they might gain access to modern information technologies that were suited to their needs. If that were achieved, it would noticeably reduce human suffering in the least developed countries.

35. His delegation was extremely concerned by the Western media's deliberate disregarding of the third world's concerns as well as its continued attempts to

distort the historical, cultural and religious realities of the Muslim and Arab peoples. It was incumbent upon Western countries and their media to review their biased policies and practices in that regard. It was also necessary to devise a global media and communications strategy that was based on transparency on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. It was more important now than ever before for the United Nations to make good use of the media. In that regard, his delegation highly appreciated the efforts of DPI in disseminating the noble mission of the Organization and called for the further expansion of DPI programmes.

36. Finally, he expressed concern that Arabic was not being given equal treatment and called upon DPI to rectify the situation. He also called for greater cooperation between DPI and the programmes and agencies of the United Nations and for the strengthening of DPI activities aimed at disseminating information on the question of Palestine, developments in the Middle East and the suffering of the Palestinian people.

37. Mr. Andersson (Sweden, Vice-Chairperson) took the Chair.

38. Ms. Nuñez Mordoché (Cuba) observed that the communication and information gap between the developed and the developing countries was widening, with the preponderance of Internet, telephone and cellphone users to be found in a handful of the developed nations. Without a true democratization of access to technological development, bolstered by substantial financial resources facilitated by the United Nations, the predicted global "information society" would remain an impossibility for most. Through its valuable information centres, the United Nations must also see to a just and balanced spread of information. Also, in order to reach the large illiterate populations in the countries of the South, the United Nations should rely on media such as the radio.

39. Under blockade and lacking resources, Cuba had given priority to the collective use of information and communication technologies: it had ensured the televised teaching of computer skills in the schools from the earliest age, brought university courses to all towns through computers and audio-visual media, established a network of community facilities that taught computer skills. It had also developed a revolutionary media-based literacy programme for use

at home and abroad, which had lifted over a million people out of ignorance in more than 10 countries, and provided the services of Cuban doctors in remote areas in more than 60 countries, who worked with the aid of computerized information and taught others to do so.

40. Once again, Cuba found it necessary to denounce the aggression, via radio and television, which the United States Government had been directing for decades against the Cuban revolution. Recently, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting had begun using aircraft to expand its television broadcasting. In 2006, \$37 million had been appropriated for the anti-Cuban propaganda broadcasts on Radio and TV Martí, a blatant new violation of international law and of the Charter of the United Nations. Over 300 hours a day of biased information and incitement for the overthrow of the constitutional order established by the Cuban people were broadcast from United States-based stations, some operated directly by the Government and some linked to well-known terrorists protected by it. While Cuba would, as always, neutralize the latest aggression against its sovereignty and independence, it had the right to denounce such illegal action and demand its cessation.

41. **Mr. Talbot** (Guyana), speaking on behalf of the member States of the Rio Group, observed that it was the task of the Department of Public Information, as the public voice of the United Nations, to provide clear, unbiased, and timely reports on the work of the Organization. The reorientation of the Department had allowed it to enhance its work and increase the visibility of the Organization through updated work methods and activities and an effective utilization of its resources. The Department had wisely decided to address some of the key issues of global concern, including HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, human development, threats to international peace and security, eradication of hunger and poverty and the United Nations reform, with attention to the newly created Human Rights Council and Peacebuilding Commission.

42. The close cooperation between the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and DPI was commendable and should be expanded to ensure the best support for vital peacekeeping operations. The Department should be aware that, even though the new information and communication technology was readily available in the developed world, the traditional means of communication like radio and the print media were to

many in the developing world still the only means of obtaining information. It should therefore expand its links with national broadcasters and journalists in order to reach a worldwide audience.

43. The United Nations Library had done well to expand its knowledge-sharing role and internal communication within the Secretariat and to focus on expanding the outreach capacity of depository libraries.

44. The importance of multilingualism as a means of transmitting the United Nations message to different regions of the world needed to be underscored. The Rio Group welcomed the efforts made to increase the quality and range of material available on the United Nations website in all the official languages; that should remain a priority. Consideration should also be given to the transmission of information in languages other than the six official ones. It was also very important that the main pages of the website had been revised to ensure its accessibility for persons with disabilities. The Department of Public Information should continue to be reinforced.

45. **Ms. Kanerva** (Finland), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the acceding countries Bulgaria and Romania; the candidate countries Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia; and, in addition, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Norway and Ukraine, observed that informing the peoples of the world about the United Nations and its goals and activities at a time when the United Nations reform was under way was a task of huge importance. DPI played a crucial role in providing accurate, impartial, comprehensive and timely information about the United Nations, and the European Union fully supported it. The Department should be commended for its commitment to pursuing genuine reform and reorienting its activities so as to further rationalize and optimize them and enhance their visibility and impact.

46. The Secretary-General's ambitious plan for the creation of regional United Nations information centres could deliver real benefits and had the full support of the European Union. Regionalization should, of course, be conducted with care and reflect the specific situation of those countries that still had information centres.

47. The European Union supported the Department's mission statement, which focused on United Nations

priorities such as poverty reduction, conflict prevention, sustainable development, human rights, HIV/AIDS, combating terrorism, and the needs of the African continent. However, those objectives could be achieved only if people were aware of the issues and the links between development, security, human rights and the rule of law. By using both traditional and new communication tools, the Department showed its commitment to people in both developed and developing countries. All needed to work together to narrow the technology gap between them.

48. The Department was taking a more strategic approach to promoting global awareness of the United Nations and had identified strategic objectives that would maximize the impact of its work: pursuing well-defined and targeted delivery of information, taking advantage of new developments in information and communication technologies, and building partnerships with civil society.

49. There had been further development of the content and design of the United Nations website, now a primary source of information on the Organization, and welcome efforts to make it accessible for persons with disabilities. The Internet being a global communication tool, it was also imperative to make full use of the United Nations linguistic diversity, moving towards parity among the official languages on the website and continuing to favour multilingualism in all activities.

50. The European Union held that freedom of the press was of pivotal importance to all societies and a crucial element in building democracy. It thus strongly condemned all attempts to control or influence the media and would like to pay its respects to all those journalists — 75 of whom had been killed in the current year alone — who had lost their lives while performing their duties.

51. **Mr. Dozenko** (Ukraine) said that his Government encouraged the efforts of DPI to meet the demands of the contemporary information society. The Department's mission statement rightly focused on key priorities that echoed the Millennium Declaration, and such objectives could be achieved only if the public was aware that development, security, human rights, justice and the rule of law were interlinked. Ukraine welcomed the Department's efforts to draw the world's attention to the activities of the new Human Rights Council as that body faced new challenges.

52. As one of the troop-contributing countries, Ukraine appreciated the growing partnership between DPI and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in raising world awareness about peacekeeping. In jointly planning, staffing and supporting the public information components of the new, expanded peacekeeping missions, they were working together to effectively publicize such United Nations success stories.

53. Ukraine also welcomed the Department's efforts to raise awareness of the lessons of the Holocaust and of the dangers of hatred, racism and prejudice. The Ukrainian people had themselves been victims of genocide for the Great Famine of 1932-1933, which had been deliberately organized by the Communist regime, had killed 25 per cent of the population. Ukraine called upon the United Nations to recognize the Great Famine as an act of genocide, a step that would help make genocide and mass abuse of human rights less possible in the future.

The meeting rose at 5.15